Andrea Thomas Brandley
Senior Education Analyst

Educational Achievement and Workforce Development: A Review of Community-Based Approaches

Community-based partnerships engage parents and families and align schools, service providers, and communities around shared goals and outcomes; when designed and implemented effectively, they offer a promising way to improve education, health, and economic opportunity for Utah youth.

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Kem C. Gardner POLICY INSTITUTE
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
DAVID ECCLES SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

10 YEARS OF IMPACT 2015–2025

411 East South Temple Street
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111
801-585-5618 | gardner.utah.edu

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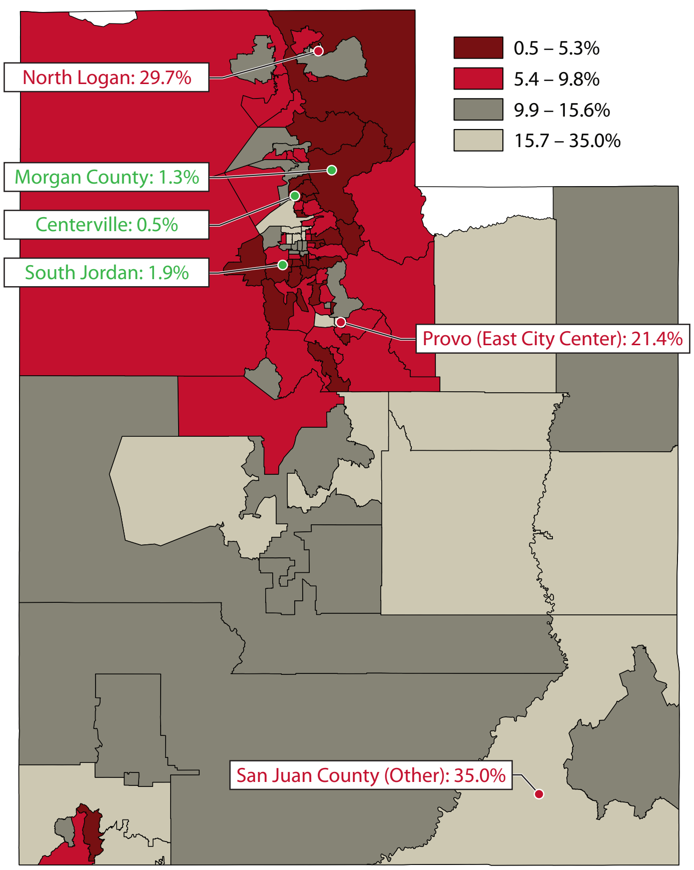
Analysis in Brief

Children's education, health, and economic outcomes differ widely across Utah communities, with some areas showing consistently higher achievement, better health, and stronger prospects than others. These differences appear in both urban and rural settings and often persist over time. Utah invests significantly in schools, health, and family services, yet many programs operate in silos, limiting their ability to address challenges that cut across sectors.

Child Poverty Rates by Utah Small Area, 2018-2022 5-year Estimate



Note: Utah Small Areas are geographic units developed by the Utah Department of Health and Human Services. Small areas allow data to be analyzed at a more granular level than counties or cities. Small areas that are also counties use the ACS county estimate.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2022 Five-year Estimates. Retrieved Tue, 29 July 2025 from the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health website: https://ibis.utah.gov/ibisph-view/

In response to a General Legislative Session request, this report examines community-based strategies that improve outcomes for children, youth, and communities by engaging parents and families and aligning education, health, and community supports. It reviews program evidence, highlights national and Utah examples, and outlines considerations for strengthening outcomes for children and youth.

Key Findings

- **Geography correlates with opportunity –** Utah children in higher-poverty areas face lower rates of upward mobility, lower educational attainment, and shorter life expectancy compared with peers in more economically advantaged neighborhoods.
- **Key ingredients drive success –** Features of effective community-based partnerships include a shared vision, cross-sector collaboration, a coordinating backbone structure, use of timely data, community involvement, and sustainable funding.
- **National and state models provide examples –** National initiatives such as Harlem Children's Zone and StriveTogether as well as community-based work occurring in other states provide illustrative examples of funding, governance, and accountability.
- **Local Utah initiatives show promise –** Programs like Promise South Salt Lake and the Roy Cone Project report reductions in juvenile arrests, higher graduation rates, and improved academic outcomes.
- **Utah invests in children and young people –** Utah invests heavily in children and youth, with over 40% of the state budget dedicated to education and other youth-focused programs. Businesses, nonprofits, federal and local government, schools, and families also support this population. Better alignment within and across these efforts could strengthen outcomes.

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The Gardner Institute would like to extend appreciation to intern Emery Bahna for her research support.

Introduction

Where a child grows up strongly correlates with their outcomes later in life. Education, employment, and health indicators vary widely across Utah communities, with some areas consistently showing higher educational achievement, better health, and stronger economic prospects. These differences appear across both urban and rural settings and persist over time.

Utah invests significant resources in education, health, and family services. These investments fund schools, public health programs, social services, and youth supports across the state. Yet many of these systems operate in silos, which can limit their ability to efficiently address complex challenges that cross sectors. Community-based, public-private partnerships offer one approach that brings schools, families, community organizations, and local leaders together to focus on shared outcomes from early learning through career entry.

In response to a General Legislative Session request, this report examines community-based strategies that target children and youth by aligning education, health, and family services and supports to improve individual and community outcomes.[1] It assesses how Utah could build on existing efforts and lessons from national models to strengthen outcomes for children and youth. It reviews evidence on location in shaping opportunity, profiles examples from Utah and other states, outlines key elements of effective partnerships, and offers considerations for how Utah could increase its engagement in these efforts.

While broader neighborhood revitalization efforts such as housing development or infrastructure investment also contribute to community well-being, examining these efforts is outside the scope of this analysis. This report focuses on locally-led strategies that directly support children and youth where they live. Improving youth outcomes can enhance the lives of Utah's young people while also strengthening Utah's future workforce and economy.

Location and Outcomes

Where a child grows up correlates with their long-term outcomes. National research shows that children raised in high-poverty neighborhoods are less likely to move to higher income levels, tend to have lower educational outcomes, and experience higher rates of chronic illness and shorter life expectancies. Nearly 90,000 Utah children live in poverty, with more than 70,000 experiencing intergenerational poverty as of 2023.[2] Over 50,000 Utah children live in high-poverty neighborhoods (areas with a high share of low-income households).[3] Persistent poverty tends to disproportionately impact remote rural areas, where one in five counties experience poverty rates above 20%.[4]

When poverty concentrates in specific areas, it can limit opportunity and contribute to long-term disparities. For example, low-income Utahns are disproportionately concentrated in areas with few neighborhood amenities and lower overall socioeconomic status.[5] While Utah's childhood poverty rate ranks second lowest among states, some Utah areas have much higher childhood poverty rates and several small areas have rates that exceed the national average (Figures 1 and 2). Using a broader threshold of 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL), often considered a marker of economic insecurity, shows 28.7% of Utah children live in households with limited resources. Families in this range often still struggle to afford basic needs and may qualify for fewer supports than those below the official poverty line.

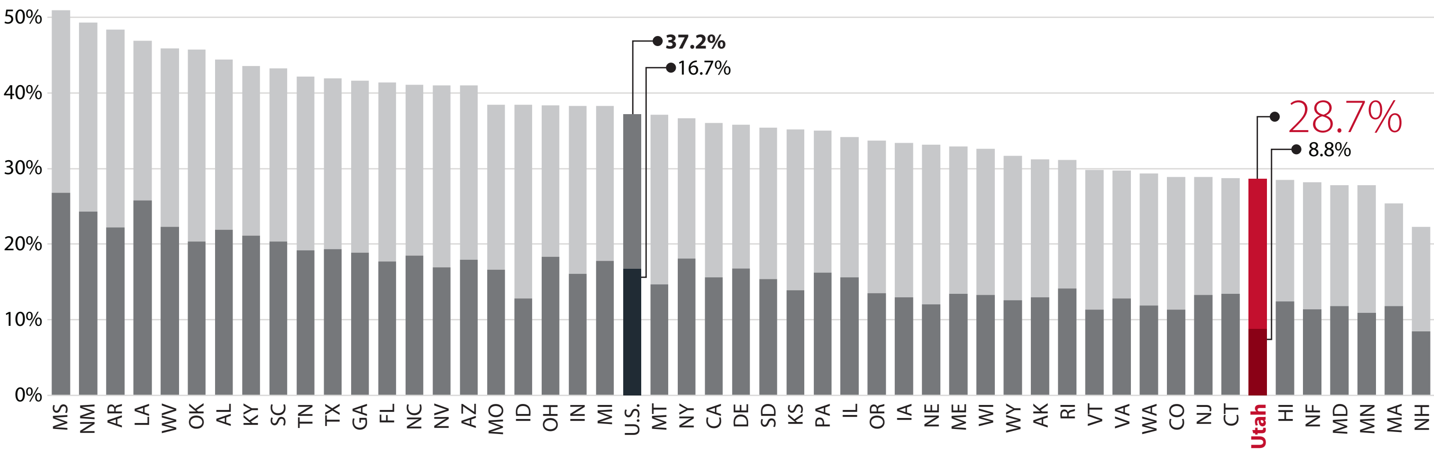
Children raised in higher-poverty neighborhoods tend to have lower rates of upward mobility. Research by Raj Chetty and colleagues shows that neighborhoods with high upward mobility share several common characteristics: lower poverty rates, more stable family structures, stronger schools, and greater social capital.[6] Utah ranks high among states for upward mobility, yet differences persist within the state (Figure 3). For example, low-income children raised west of 700 East in Salt Lake City experience lower rates of upward mobility than peers raised to the east (Figure 4).[7]

Youth and Family Support Pipeline

Community-based initiatives focus on improving economic mobility through a coordinated approach and supporting children and youth from early childhood through workforce entry. This approach connects services and opportunities at every life stage, ensuring that progress in one stage builds toward success in the next. It emphasizes the entire life-stage pathway, connecting individual programs within the pathway. Schools, families, employers, health providers, and community organizations work together to provide young people with consistent, connected support from birth to adulthood. This aims to ensure early investments extend to strong educational, workforce, and life outcomes.

- **Early Learning** – Kindergarten readiness; early health and development
- **Elementary Grades** – Foundational reading and math skills
- **Middle School** – Continued academic engagement; career exploration
- **High School** – Graduation and postsecondary readiness
- **Postsecondary** – Credential or degree completion
- **Workforce Entry** – Employment in a sustainable career

Figure 1: Children Living Below 100% and 200% FPL by State, 2018–2022 5-year Estimate



Note: FPL refers to the federal poverty level, a measure of income used to determine eligibility for certain programs and benefits. In 2022, the poverty threshold for a family of four was $27,750 (100% FPL). Twice that amount, $55,500 (200% FPL), is often used as a benchmark for economic insecurity.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2022 5-year Estimates

Figure 2: Child Poverty Rates by Utah Small Area, 2018-2022 5-year Estimate

Note: Utah Small Areas are geographic units developed by the Utah Department of Health and Human Services. Small areas allow data to be analyzed at a more granular level than counties or cities. Small areas that are also counties use the ACS county estimate.
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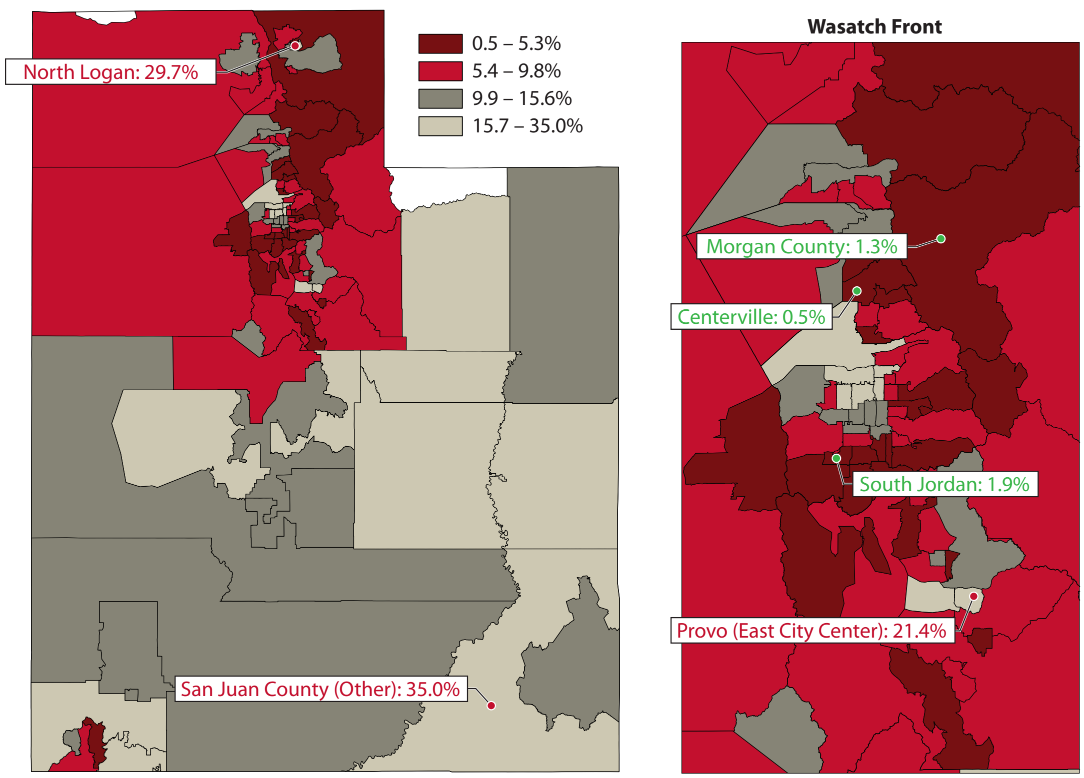


Improving Mobility

In a 2025 presentation to Utah leaders, economist Raj Chetty outlined three policy approaches to improving mobility: (1) reducing segregation, (2) place-based investments, and (3) higher education and workforce training.

He also emphasized three points for increasing opportunity going forward:

1. **Focus on Childhood Environment** – Provide opportunity-rich environments from birth to adulthood.
2. **Social Communities as a Unit of Change –**Target communities that have historically lacked opportunity.
3. **Invest in Social Capital –** Connect those who don't have opportunity to those who do.

Source: Chetty, R. (2025). Sustaining Opportunity in Salt Lake City. New Insights from Big Data. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Societal Impact Seminar.

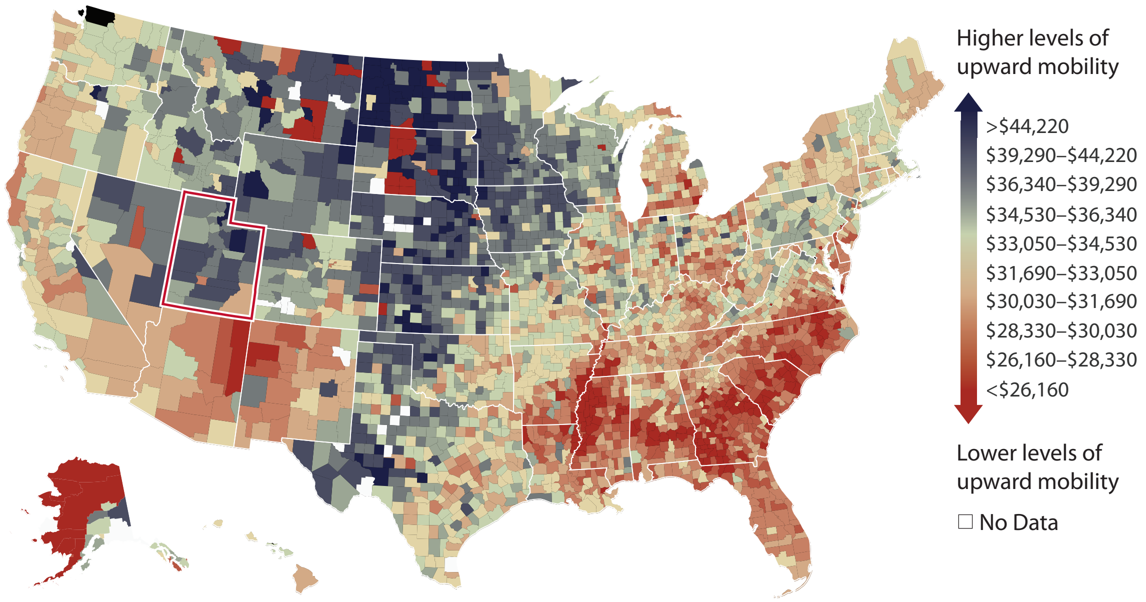


Figure 3: U.S. Upward Mobility by County
Average income at age 35 for children born from 1978 to 1992 for parents earning in the 25th income percentile

Note: Average income for children born from 1978 to 1992 to parents earning in the 25th income percentile (~$33,000 in 2023 dollars).
Source: Opportunity Insights (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, Porter)

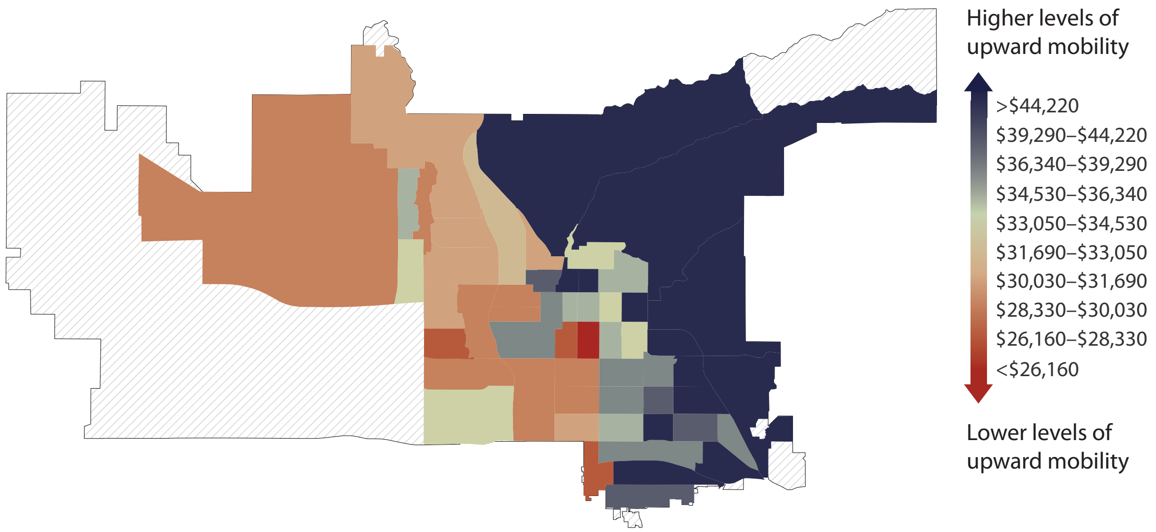


Figure 4: Salt Lake City Upward Mobility by Census Tract
Average income at age 35 for children born from 1978 to 1983 for parents earning in the 25th income percentile

Source: Opportunity Insights (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, Porter)

Chetty's analysis of *Moving to Opportunity* shows that children who moved from public housing to lower-poverty neighborhoods at a young age were more likely to attend college, less likely to be a single-parent, less likely to live in lower poverty neighborhoods as adults, and earned an average of $302,000 more over their lifetimes.[8] These findings underscore that children's opportunities are shaped not only by individual or family circumstances but also by the broader environments in which they grow up.

Research suggests neighborhood conditions affect educational outcomes as well. Children in higher-poverty areas are more likely to attend under-resourced schools and experience factors that reduce academic performance.[9] Even when controlling for several other factors, children living in high-poverty neighborhoods earn lower test scores and educational attainment across generations.[10] In contrast, proximity to four-year colleges and high local college-attendance rates correlate with higher postsecondary enrollment.[11] These patterns are especially pronounced in rural communities, where access to both K–12 and postsecondary options may be limited.[12]

Health outcomes also vary by geography. Residents in lower-income neighborhoods tend to have higher rates of chronic diseases such as heart disease, asthma, and diabetes, along with higher rates of poor mental health.[13,14] Contributing factors include environmental exposure, limited access to care, and food insecurity (which can be more pronounced in rural communities).[15,16] Life expectancy, which is a general measure of an area's health and well-being, varies by more than ten years between Utah's most and least advantaged neighborhoods (Figure 6).[17]

A review of the literature indicates research and policy discussions often highlight two main strategies for addressing concentrated poverty.[18] One focuses on mobility—helping families move to neighborhoods with lower poverty rates and greater access to opportunity. The other emphasizes community- or place-based strategies—improving conditions in the neighborhoods where families already live. Mobility strategies can yield substantial gains for individuals who relocate early in life, as seen in the Moving to Opportunity results. However, these strategies typically impact only a small portion of residents. Community-based strategies, by contrast, aim to improve conditions for all children and families in a community, offering the potential for broader, more sustained impact.

This report specifically focuses on community-based strategies that directly support children and youth from early learning through career entry. These strategies aim to establish conditions that enable children and youth to succeed where they live, laying the groundwork for a more skilled workforce, greater economic mobility, and stronger, more resilient communities.

Figure 5: Share of Utah Adults 25 and Older with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Small Area, 2018-2022 5-year Estimate

Note: Utah Small Areas are geographic units developed by the Utah Department of Health and Human Services. Small areas allow data to be analyzed at a more granular level than counties or cities. Small areas that are also counties use the ACS county estimate.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2022 Five-year Estimates. Retrieved Tue, 29 July 2025 from the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health website: https://ibis.utah.gov/ibisph-view/

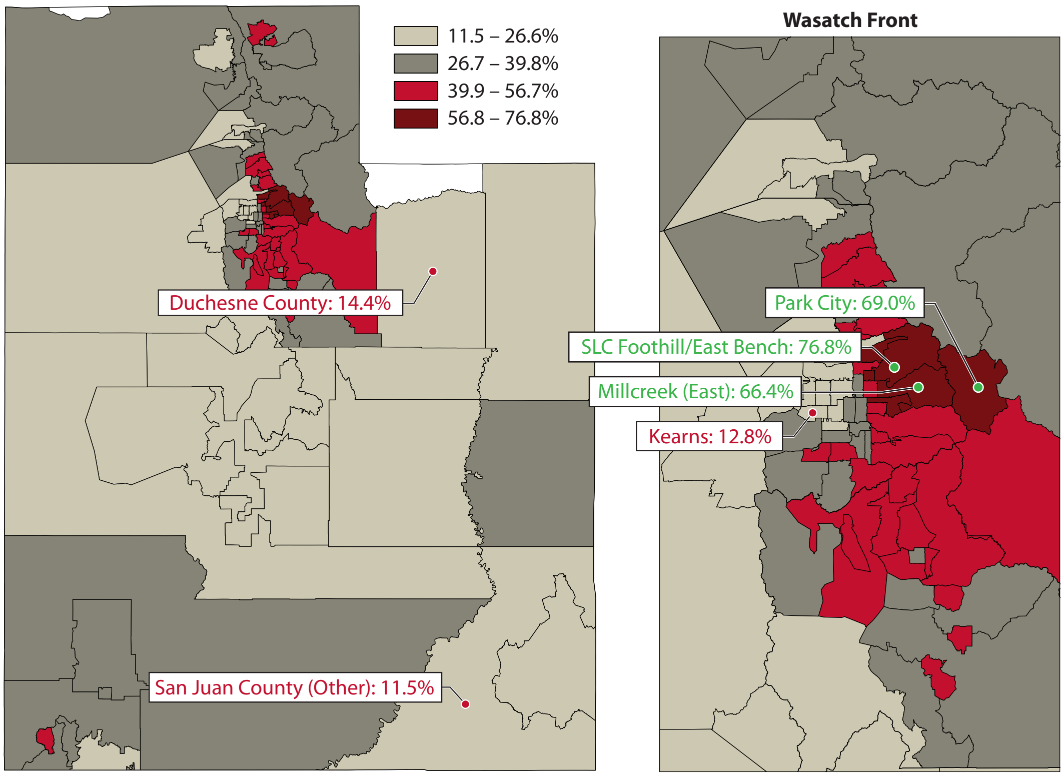
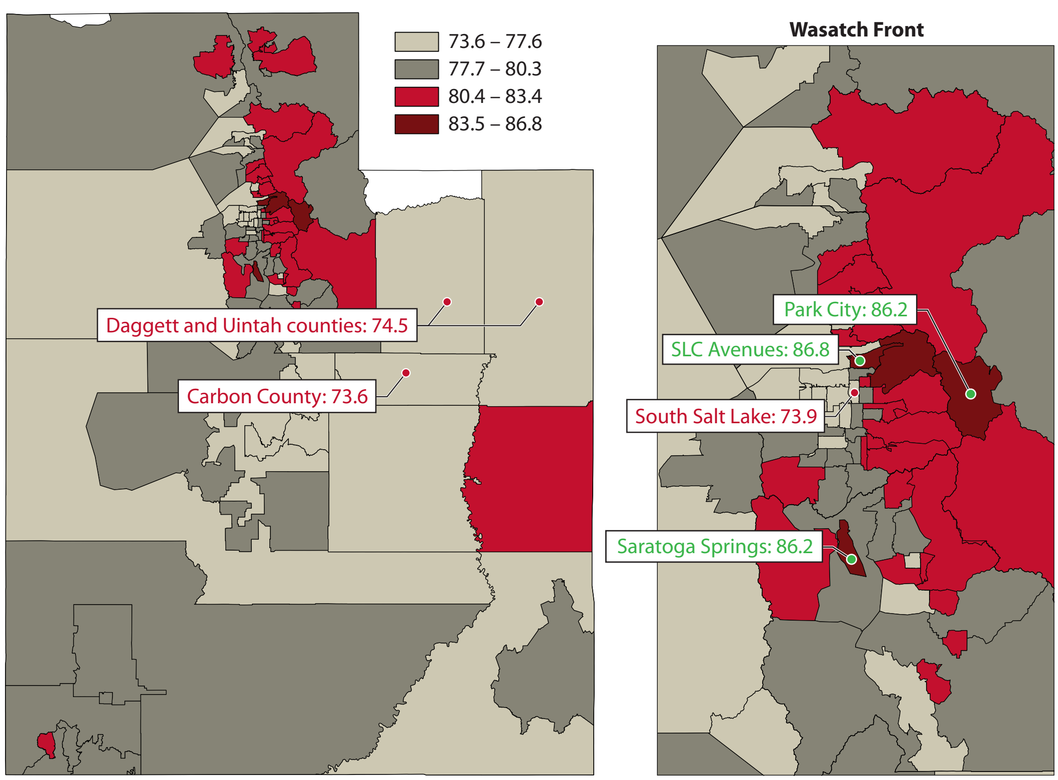


Figure 6: Utah Life Expectancy at Birth by Small Area, 2019-2023 5-year Estimate

Source: Utah Death Certificate Database, Office of Vital Records and Statistics, Utah Department of Health and Human Services. Population estimates used linear interpolation of U.S. Census Bureau, Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute population estimates, and ESRI ZIP Code data provided annual population estimates for ZIP Code areas by sex and age groups, IBIS Version 2023, National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved Tue, 29 July 2025 from the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health website: https://ibis.utah.gov/ibisph-view/"



The Role of Social Capital

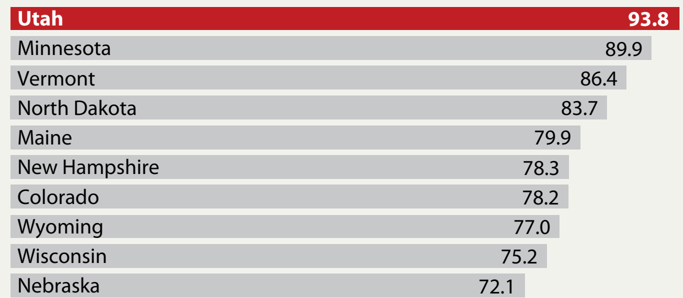
Differences across neighborhoods not only reflect access to resources and population characteristics but also the level of social capital. Social capital refers to the networks, trust, and norms that connect people within a community. Parents and families play a central role in building social capital through stable relationships, volunteering in schools and communities, and providing informal networks of support. Higher levels of social capital correlate with stronger educational attainment, better health, and greater economic mobility. These benefits often emerge through improved access to information, mutual support, and collective problem-solving.

The Utah Foundation measures social capital using more than 30 metrics across seven areas: (1) civic engagement, (2) social trust, (3) community life, (4) family health, (5) social cohesion, (6) focus on future generations, and (7) social mobility. When combined into an overall index, Utah ranks highest among states for social capital. While this specific measure is not available at a more granular geographic level, other research shows that levels of social capital vary significantly across neighborhoods and closely connect to upward mobility.[19,20]

Social capital alone cannot offset barriers such as limited access to quality schools or health care, but it can contribute to shaping opportunity. Community-based partnerships can build on existing social capital using trust and engagement to align resources, connect diverse groups, and support community-led solutions.

Figure 7: Social Capital, 2021

Social Capital Index, Top Ten States



Source: Utah Foundation

National Context

Communities across the country have taken different paths to developing community-based strategies over the last several decades and there are variety of large-scale, community-based initiatives to learn from. Some are highly localized, and others are coordinated at the state or national level. This section highlights select national and state models that shape the field of economic mobility partnerships. These examples illustrate different ways to organize cross-sector collaborations, braid funding streams, and sustain long-term work. Examining how other communities structure their initiatives, set goals, and measure progress, can help inform what strategies, governance models, and funding approaches may be most relevant to Utah's context.

National Initiatives

Several national community-based initiatives seek to reduce intergenerational poverty and support children from early childhood through career. While their structures differ, most receive their funding primarily from philanthropy or federal government sources. The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), one of the earliest and best-known examples, provides all services under one organization, including education, health, and family programs. Inspired by HCZ, the federal Promise Neighborhoods program provides grants for similar efforts nationwide, while HCZ's national impact arm supports aligned efforts across the country. Partners for Rural Impact implements a rural iteration of the Promise Neighborhood model in rural Appalachian Kentucky, East Texas, and Mexico, Missouri. StriveTogether and Partners for Rural Impact emphasize aligning existing systems and resources through local leadership, cross-sector partnerships, and continuous data use. Purpose Built Communities integrates housing, education, and community wellness in neighborhood improvement. Together, these initiatives illustrate different approaches to achieving better education and workforce outcomes with a community-based focus (Table 1).

State-Supported Models

A growing number of states also invest public resources in community-based efforts. These state-led initiatives provide funding, supportive policy, and infrastructure that enables coordination across systems. The following examples highlight how states are formalizing support for community-based strategies through organizational and governance support, funding such as competitive grants and outcomes-based financing, and alignment with statewide priorities.

Florida Children's Initiative

Florida's Children's Initiative, established by the Florida Legislature in 2008, targets five high-poverty neighborhoods lacking middle-class infrastructure and opportunities.[21,22] Modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone, it partners with local organizations to provide coordinated services across eight pillars: (1) early childhood development, (2) education, (3) health, (4) youth support, (5) family support, (6) workforce development, (7) community safety,

Table 1: National Community-Based Economic Mobility Initiatives

Program	Geography	Approach	Reported Outcomes
Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ)[23]	100+ block "zone" in Central Harlem. Serves as a national model.	Direct service model: early childhood, K–12, health, and family programs delivered under one organization.	Closed the achievement gap at HCZ Promise Academy Charter schools; 1,800+ scholars graduated from college since 2011; ~1,000 currently enrolled.
Promise Neighborhoods (U.S. Department of Education)[24]	46 neighborhoods in 20 states.	Federal program supporting HCZ-inspired efforts in high-need communities through competitive grants.	Mixed results: some neighborhoods report gains in education and other metrics; others show little or no change.
StriveTogether[25]	Supports 70 communities across nearly 30 states.	National backbone organization supporting local cross-sector partnerships; emphasizes data-driven improvement.	Over 50% of communities improved reading and math scores, graduation rates, and college completion; 60% achieved local policy wins; 22 advanced to the next "gateway" stage of change.
Partners for Rural Impact (PRI)[26]	Movement of rural places across the nation with rural Promise Neighborhoods in KY, MO, and TX.	Rural-focused partnerships aligning schools, nonprofits, and community leaders across education and workforce goals.	Appalachian KY Partnership outperforms KY state averages in reading, math, and high school graduation. Below state average for kindergarten readiness, college completion, and chronic absenteeism.
Purpose Built Communities[27,28]	25+ neighborhoods in 14 states.	Focuses on developing mixed-income housing, quality schools, and community wellness.	4 of 5 communities saw poverty decline.

Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy institute based on literature review

and (8) housing. These efforts address disparities in school readiness, academic achievement, exposure to violence, and health care access. The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida, a private non-profit focused on investing in innovative community-based programs targeting at-risk children and families, governs the initiative. Communities can request a state-funded planning grant to apply for a Florida Children's Initiative designation. Communities with this designation receive state funding through a performance-based contract that links payments to the achievement of outcomes outlined in their strategic community plan.

The Parramore Kids Zone in Orlando began serving children in 2006. Between 2006 and 2019, juvenile arrests declined 78.3%, teen births declined 63.4%, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers attending early learning programs increased 117%, and verified cases of child abuse and neglect declined 62.5% in Parramore. These successes led the city to replicate the model in additional Orlando neighborhoods.[29]

Ohio Regional Education Partnerships

Ohio's Regional Partnership Program, established by Senate Bill 208 in 2024, creates a statewide network of community-based partnerships spanning eight regions that connect and support early childhood through workforce entry initiatives.[30,31] These cross-sector collaborations include early learning providers, K–12 schools, postsecondary institutions, workforce agencies, businesses, and health systems, all working to improve state-defined outcomes such as kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading, FAFSA completion, postsecondary attainment, and workforce placement. Ohio's Departments of Education and Workforce, Higher Education, and Children and Youth jointly govern the initiative, which received $2.5 million in initial state funding along with additional grants to support local partnerships. The departments convene partnerships at least quarterly to share best practices and report progress and outcomes to the governor and General Assembly annually. Though this initiative is new, existing partnerships like Learn to Earn Dayton show positive impacts on early education outcomes with English and math performance rising from single digits to around 25–30%.[32]

Tennessee Seeding Success

Tennessee's Seeding Success, located in Memphis and Shelby County, is a decade-long initiative focused on improving outcomes across education, health, justice, and economic development.[33,34] Although the state does not directly fund the initiative, Seeding Success has worked with partners to secure funding for key education and workforce priorities. For example, the initiative worked with state leaders to redirect $750 million in federal funds from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) toward family support strategies. When a federal grant for pre-K ended, Seeding Success helped secure $20 million annually in outcomes-based funding from local government, maintaining and expanding access to preschool for local students. Seeding Success also collaborated with the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis and more than 300 multi-sector partners to launch *More for Memphis*, a plan developed with input from youth and families to improve long-term life quality in the region.

North Carolina Smart Start Program

Launched in 1993, North Carolina's Smart Start, a statewide public-private early childhood system, serves children from birth to age five through 75 local nonprofit partnerships that cover all 100 counties.[35] The initiative is overseen by the North Carolina Partnership for Children, which provides statewide coordination and consistency while giving communities local control to determine how best to achieve desired outcomes. Local partnerships coordinate childcare subsidies, health screenings, family supports, and early learning programs.

In 2023–24, Smart Start partnerships spent $156 million in state funds and more than $60 million in federal, local, and private dollars on childcare subsidies, early childhood education services, health initiatives, and family support programs. Evaluations by Duke University show that children participating in Smart Start and More at Four early childhood programs achieve lasting academic gains in math and reading and reduced special education placement. Researchers found these effects persisted or grew through the end of elementary school.[36]

Colorado's Local Coordinating Organizations (LCOs)

As part of the 2022 legislation establishing Universal Preschool (UPK), Colorado created a network of Local Coordinating Organizations (LCOs) to serve as the local hub for early childhood programs.[37,38] The intent was to avoid siloed systems and ensure that local communities drive coordination and service delivery. Eligible LCOs include county or municipal governments, school districts, early childhood councils, family resource centers, Head Start grantees, nonprofits, and other community-based entities.

In 2022, the state selected 32 LCOs to cover catchment areas ranging from one to six counties. Each LCO is tasked with developing a community plan, assisting families applying for early childhood and family support programs, recruiting and supporting providers, coordinating funding streams, and ensuring equitable distribution of preschool slots. The state provides each LCO with baseline administrative funding (that supports half-time staff in the smallest catchments to two full-time staff in larger ones). LCOs can also request additional resources through community plans. LCOs operate under three-year agreements with the Colorado Department of Early Childhood, which monitors performance and can replace LCOs not meeting requirements. The model establishes a formal mechanism for linking state oversight with locally led planning and service delivery.

Maryland ENOUGH Act

Maryland's Engaging Neighborhoods, Organizations, Unions, Governments, and Households (ENOUGH) Act, passed in 2024, aims to reduce child poverty.[39] It provides competitive grants up to $10 million annually to cross-sector partnerships—including nonprofits, schools, local governments, unions, and residents—focused on improving community health, safety, education, and economic opportunity through a cradle-to-career framework.[40] It offers three tracks tailored to a community's stage of engagement including partnership development, plan development, and implementation. With an initial $20 million state investment and over $100 million in combined public and private investments planned over four years, the Act emphasizes building civic infrastructure and fostering collaboration to drive lasting change.[41] The program currently supports 27 community partnerships across 12 Maryland counties.[42]

Utah Context

Utah builds on an existing foundation of community-based work. Several communities implement coordinated, cross-sector initiatives that address local needs and, in some cases, demonstrate measurable results. Examining these ongoing efforts can help identify opportunities to strengthen and expand effective community-based approaches.

Utah Initiatives

Utah communities host a variety of community-based initiatives that align schools, local governments, nonprofits, and other partners to improve outcomes for children and families. These efforts—such as Promise Partnership Utah, Promise South Salt Lake, Millcreek Promise, and the Roy Cone Project—focus on cross-sector collaboration, data-driven planning, and shared accountability. They work to strengthen academic achievement while addressing broader needs like health, safety, and economic stability.

In addition to these formal initiatives, nonprofits, religious organizations, and other community groups operate a broad network of youth programs in Utah. Integrating these programs and services into community-based partnerships could create a more comprehensive system of support by improving coordination, avoiding duplication, filling service gaps, and directing resources where they are most needed.

Promise Partnership Utah

Promise Partnership Utah, a public-private partnership, works to improve educational outcomes for Utah children.[43] Operating as a "backbone" organization, it convenes partners in a cross-sector, economic mobility collective impact effort. Promise partners include six school districts, four state systems, eight communities, 1,250 volunteers, more than 600 businesses, philanthropists, and community organizations, six higher education institutions, and 473,000 youth ages 0-24.

Promise partners seek to align programs, resources, data-driven planning, and support at the school, community, and systems levels to improve student outcomes. Promise Partnership employs continuous improvement practices and shared accountability—measuring progress across the education and workforce pipeline. Outcome indicators include:

- Kindergarten readiness
- 3rd grade reading proficiency
- 8th grade math proficiency
- High school graduation (percentage of students who graduate in four years)
- Postsecondary readiness (composite ACT score of 18+)
- Postsecondary completion
- Health (share of adults in good, very good, or excellent health)
- Financial stability (share of individuals with household incomes at or above 200% of federal poverty level)

Promise South Salt Lake

Promise South Salt Lake launched in 2008 to support youth and families through education, safety, and opportunity.[44,45] Its three core "promises" are:

- **Promise 1: Education** – Every child has the opportunity to attend and to graduate from college.
- **Promise 2: Safety** – Every resident has a safe, clean home and neighborhood.
- **Promise 3: Opportunity** – Everyone has the opportunity to be healthy and to prosper.

Promise South Salt Lake focuses on nine "Promise Pillars" as the foundation needed for a thriving community: (1) social impact, (2) health, (3) arts, (4) education, (5) safety, (6) workforce development, (7) neighborhoods, (8) housing, and (9) transportation. The South Salt Lake Cares Coalition brings together community members, leaders, and businesses to work together to strengthen partnerships, assess community needs, build capacity, plan programming, and advise activities with the goal of giving all residents the opportunity to succeed.

Promise South Salt Lake provides free youth, family, and community services in local schools and community centers. These include youth after-school and summer programs, adult education programs, community resource navigation and referral services, events, and more. In addition to offering direct programming, Promise South Salt Lake partners with businesses, universities, state agencies, and non-profits to fill identified needs for South Salt Lake residents.

Funded by federal, state, and philanthropic dollars, it serves more than 3,000 children, teens, and families through 14 programs at eight schools and four community locations. In 2012, the initiative became a formal city department, enabling coordination with other city services while maintaining a focus on its mission.

Since implementation, available data show improvements in South Salt Lake across several areas:

- An 85% reduction in juvenile arrests during afterschool hours (3:00 to 6:00 PM) from 2012 to 2024.
- In 2023-24, participants in after-school and summer programs had fewer unexcused absences and earned a higher number of academic credits when compared to non-participants.
- The four South Salt Lake promise community elementary schools outperform demographically similar schools in third grade reading and math.
- Graduation rates for refugee students at Cottonwood High improved by more than 30 percentage points from 2012 to 2024 and have exceeded non-refugee students since 2019.

Millcreek Promise

Launched in 2018, Millcreek Promise, a community-driven initiative, promotes the success and well-being of Millcreek youth and families.[46] The mission of Millcreek Promise is to "mobilize and support Millcreek residents to build community, bridge divides, and lift all boats." It collaborates with Promise Partnership Utah, economic well-being, education, health, and safety committees, residents, volunteers, and other partners to support Millcreek youth and families through three promises:

1. **Education –** All Millcreek youth have the support to maximize academic success on their path to high school graduation and post-secondary education.
2. **Health & Safety –** All Millcreek residents have access to health and safety services and resources.
3. **Economic Well-Being –** All Millcreek residents have the opportunities to provide a high quality of life for themselves and their families.

Millcreek Promise mobilizes resources and stakeholders to address service gaps, strengthen existing programs, and build a more connected and equitable community. Recent efforts include hosting after-school programs, career events at schools, and resume building workshops. The initiative uses data to track progress toward goals like 100% graduation and economic stability. It continues to expand through strategic collaborations and a strong focus on community well-being.

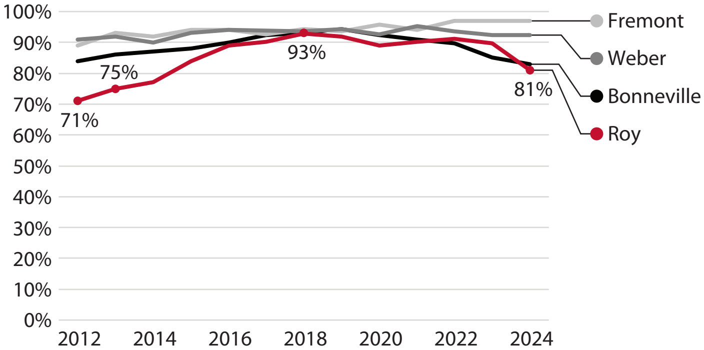
Roy Cone Project

The Roy Cone Project aligns all Roy-area elementary and middle schools with Roy High School to boost student success.[47] The initiative launched in 2013 with a one-time $250,000 state grant matched by a private donation from a local resident. Using the mantra "One town, one team, one dream. Everyone graduates." leaders developed a strategic plan centered on improving attendance, college and career readiness, and whole-child support.

The project provides students with mentors to guide and support them on their path to graduation through home visits and tailored interventions to meet individual needs. Expanded access to Advanced Placement (AP), concurrent enrollment, and career technical education also helps students obtain post-secondary education.

Graduation rates increased 18 percentage points from 75% in 2013 to 93% in 2018, matching graduation rates at the other three district high schools. These gains persisted for several years, falling slightly during pandemic years before falling more significantly in 2024 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Weber School District High School Graduation Rates, 2012-2024



Note: Excludes alternative and magnet high schools (Horizon Academy, Two Rivers High, and Weber Innovation High School).
Source: Utah State Board of Education

Third Grade Reading (SB 127, 2024 General Session)

During the 2022 General Session, the Legislature passed SB 127 to strengthen early literacy outcomes, setting a target of 70% third grade reading proficiency by 2027. The bill directed funding toward evidence-based interventions, professional development for teachers, and accountability measures tied to literacy improvement. This highlights the state's focus on a key education milestone. Community-based partnerships in Utah often track similar outcomes, such as early grade reading proficiency, and could serve as a vehicle to align community supports with this statewide priority.

Utah's Investments in Children and Youth

Utah makes substantial public investments in children and young adults through education, health, social services, and juvenile justice funding. Together, these areas account for more than 40% of the state budget (about $9 billion in FY 2026) and reach nearly every child at some stage of development. An additional $1.0 billion in federal funds supporting schools and other social services, and $1.8 billion in local funds for K–12 schools, further expand the state's investment.[48] These dollars support a wide array of activities, from classroom instruction, transportation, and school meals to early literacy initiatives, mental health services, child protection, health care coverage, and rehabilitation for youth in state custody.

These public investments also represent only part of Utah's broader ecosystem of programs serving children and youth. Nonprofits, private businesses, faith-based organizations, and philanthropies contribute resources through tutoring, mentoring, increasing access to health care, job training, and more. Utah consistently ranks as the most charitable state in the nation, leading all other states in the percentage of donated income, share of residents who volunteer, and volunteer hours per capita.[49] Parents and families play a central role as well, contributing time, resources, and support to children's health and well-being.

The Role of Data in Community-Based Work

Effective community-based partnerships depend on timely, disaggregated data to guide decisions and measure progress. These data are shared securely with parental consent and strong privacy protections in place. There are two main uses for this data:

- **Tracking outcomes across the education and workforce pipeline –** Communities need to monitor indicators such as early literacy, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment to know whether strategies are effective. Without real-time data, it can take years to identify whether interventions are successful.
- **Targeting interventions for individual students –** Disaggregated data allow educators and partners to identify which students are most in need of support and to coordinate resources more effectively, helping public investment have greater impact.

The Utah Data Research Center (UDRC) provides a valuable resource for community-based initiatives by linking education, workforce, and health data across agencies. However, because UDRC depends on partner agencies to provide updates—typically on an annual basis—data availability can lag real-time needs. Access also requires formal approval processes, which can make rapid decision-making more difficult.

Partnerships may need additional data-sharing agreements to respond to student needs in real time, while ensuring compliance with privacy laws. Utah Promise Partnership communities develop these agreements allowing them to access data for the populations they serve.

These substantial investments may not be fully maximized, however, as both public and private efforts often operate in silos. A study of Utah's charitable giving by the Cicero Group noted that while collaboration has improved in recent years, fragmentation continues to limit impact.[50] Government programs experience similar challenges.

Aligning efforts across sectors—and connecting some of these public and private resources more deliberately—could align supports to better target statewide and area-specific priorities, strengthen outcomes, and help Utah maximize the return on its investment in children and youth.

Figure 9: Cross-Sector Ecosystem for Youth Success

Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute

Where to Target Community-Based Investments?

A core principle of community-based investment is focusing resources in a limited geographic area to drive deeper impact, rather than spreading funds broadly and "diluting their reach."[51] While need is an essential factor in targeting community-based investments, it should not be the only consideration. Research suggests successful community-based partnerships also require key conditions for implementation such as cross-sector leadership, shared community vision, access to usable data, and infrastructure to support coordination and continuous improvement.

Without these elements, investments in high-need areas may struggle to gain traction or sustain impact. Research also suggests that community "readiness," including collaborative capacity and trust among partners, significantly influences whether initiatives can drive measurable change.[52,53]

Identifying areas that demonstrate both high need and sufficient local will and infrastructure can help maximize the impact of community-based strategies.

Key Elements of Effective Partnerships

Many of the models highlighted above share similar features.[54] These shared features are outlined below and provide a framework for how diverse partners can align efforts, measure results, and adapt over time. They also offer a starting point for considering how such approaches might be implemented in Utah communities.

1. **Shared Vision and Accountability:** Partners align around a common set of education and workforce outcomes such as early reading, high school graduation, and postsecondary completion, and commit to shared responsibility for achieving them. This shared vision supports coordinated decision-making, efficient resource use, and consistent focus across the full continuum from early childhood through career entry.
2. **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Schools, higher education, health providers, employers, nonprofits, and government work together to provide a seamless economic mobility pathway. Schools focus on academics, while other partners address health care, mental health, nutrition, housing stability, family engagement, and other needs. Aligning roles and integrating services ensures children and youth receive consistent, sustained support and allows each partner to focus on its strengths.
3. **Coordinated Backbone Structure:** A backbone organization coordinates the partnerships, facilitating collaboration, managing data, and guiding continuous improvement. While specific backbone functions can be shared among partners, a single anchor helps prevent fragmentation and duplication of effort. It can also provide economies of scale for administrative functions.
4. **Data-Driven Continuous Improvement:** Initiatives embed cycles of collecting, analyzing, and acting on real-time disaggregated data. This process helps partners identify emerging needs, adjust strategies, and track progress toward shared goals.
5. **Community-rooted Approach:** The community-based work is grounded in the strengths and needs of a defined geography, shaped by local context, and guided by leaders who live in or have deep ties to the community. Parents and families can serve as both drivers of strategy and partners in implementation. This fosters trust, strengthens relationships, and ensures strategies reflect local priorities.
6. **Sustainable Funding and Policy Alignment:** Braiding local, state, federal, and philanthropic resources that support common education, workforce, and health strategies can help provide stable long-term funding. Supportive policy environments and cross-sector policy alignment can also help sustain momentum and reinforce systems that support shared outcomes.

Implementation Considerations

If Utah chooses to invest in community-based economic mobility strategies, decisions about funding, governance, and accountability will influence how well these efforts align resources, sustain impact, and adapt to local needs. Lessons from national initiatives and other states provide models that Utah could adapt to its context.

Funding Approaches

State, local, federal, and philanthropic dollars are often allocated in silos, limiting coordination and reducing overall impact. Funding partnerships—rather than individual entities—may help break down these silos, reduce competition for resources, and encourage collaboration toward shared outcomes. Embedding expectations for elements such as a shared vision, coordinated backbone support, and data-driven improvement can further align local strategies with statewide goals. Accessing multiple funding sources also makes initiatives less vulnerable to changes in any single revenue stream.

The following are examples of ways funding approaches can be designed to influence flexibility, sustainability, and local buy-in.

- **State Competitive Grants:** Competitive grant programs, such as Maryland and Ohio, provide flexible funding to cross-sector partnerships working toward economic mobility goals. These grants allow communities to design locally tailored solutions while aligning to shared state priorities.
- **Braided Public Funds:** Several initiatives coordinate existing federal and state funding streams to support integrated service delivery. Examples of these funding streams include TANF, CCDF, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), early childhood funding, and workforce development programs.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Ongoing funding tied to demonstrated outcomes can strengthen long-term viability. Florida's model, for example, provides continued support to designated areas as long as they meet performance goals.
- **Income Tax Revenue:** Utah's constitution dedicates income tax revenue to programs for education, children, and individuals with disabilities. Because economic mobility strategies often focus on education, early childhood, and family well-being, these funds could support community-based efforts aimed at improving child outcomes through education, health, or social supports.
- **Matching Requirements:** Local match requirements, such as those in North Carolina, encourage philanthropic and community investments that extend program reach and sustainability. Local and national philanthropists may also be willing to match state dollars.
- **National Philanthropy:** National philanthropies such as Blue Meridian Partners, Ballmer Group, the Duke Endowment, George Kaiser Family Foundation, and Maycomb capital also invest in community-based work and may be more likely to engage if state funding is in place, bringing more investment and outside dollars to support Utah youth. For example, Blue Meriadian's "Place Matters" investment has committed more than $415 million to nearly 20 place-based partnerships nationwide since 2020.[55]
- **Dedicated Revenue Streams:** Colorado uses a voter-approved nicotine tax to fund universal preschool and the local coordination infrastructure. Similar mechanisms could be explored in Utah if dedicated, long-term funding is desired.

Governance and Coordination

Strong governance helps ensure that community-based initiatives operate with clear roles, aligned priorities, and effective connections between state and local partners. Well-designed coordination structures can reduce duplication, bridge gaps between agencies, and help local strategies align with broader state goals.[56,57]

Models from other states often use multi-layered systems—pairing state-level leadership (that provides strategic direction) with local backbones that lead implementation and community engagement. Utah could adapt similar approaches to ensure decisions are made efficiently and partnerships remain responsive to community needs. The following provides more detail on this multi-layered approach and possible examples of participating entities.

Multi-Layered Backbone Structure

The state backbone provides strategic alignment, funding, and technical assistance, while local backbones lead implementation, engage community stakeholders, and adapt strategies to reflect local conditions.

- **State-Level Coordination Entity:** Consider designating a state agency or partner to oversee grantmaking, provide technical assistance, manage reporting, and ensure alignment with statewide goals. Potential options include:
  - **Governor's Office:** Housing the coordinating entity in the Governor's Office could better encourage cross-agency collaboration and alignment. The entity could sit within the Utah Office of Families or in a newly created interagency council or working group. Additional infrastructure may be needed to manage implementation and support local partners.
  - **State Agencies:** Possible coordinating entities include the Utah Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Department of Workforce Services (DWS), State

Board of Education (USBE), and Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity (GOEO). Each brings existing responsibilities and expertise that could support children and families though their placement may emphasize different sectors unless paired with strong interagency collaboration.

  - **Designated Nonprofit Intermediary:** Utah could partner with a new or existing nonprofit to coordinate statewide activities. This option may offer more flexibility and community responsiveness but would require clear oversight and strong connections to state agencies. The One Utah Health Collaborative is one example of this type of structure as it coordinates statewide efforts in partnership with public agencies.[58]

- **Local Implementation Roles:** Consider one of two main approaches:
  - **New Local Coordinating Entities:** The state could establish a formal structure for new coordinating entities, with clear expectations and dedicated funding to support implementation. Maryland offers one example, using Local Management Boards—created in the mid-1990s—to give communities greater authority to plan, implement, and monitor services for children and families. These boards, funded through the Governor's Office for Children, coordinate local services and ensure accountability. In Utah, new entities could manage partnerships, use data for continuous improvement, and serve as the primary point of contact with the state. While this approach provides consistency and clarity, it would also require upfront investment in capacity building and governance support and could take significant time and resources to establish.
  - **Flexible Local Lead Model:** Alternatively, communities could identify their own lead entity based on local capacity and context. Colorado uses this approach by designating existing local entities as local leads to cover the entire state. Florida also uses this approach and accepts applications from interested communities on an ongoing basis. Utah could adopt a similar model by defining eligibility criteria and guardrails but allowing flexibility in who serves as the backbone. This would enable structures to vary according to local needs and resources. Potential leads could include:
    - Local Education Agencies (LEAs)
    - Regional Education Service Areas (RESAs) in rural areas
    - County or city governments
    - Local Health Departments
    - Local Mental Health and Substance Use Authorities
    - Community-based nonprofits

- **Cross-Sector Representation:** Governance bodies at both the state and local levels often include leaders from education, health, workforce, housing, human services, and nonprofit organizations, along with parents, families, and community members. Involving a broad mix of participants helps ensure strategies reflect community priorities and strengthens coordination.

Accountability and Evaluation

Community-based partnerships show promise in improving outcomes for children and families across education, health, and workforce measures. At the same time, results can be uneven, and the work is inherently long-term and complex. Outcomes often take years to achieve, are shaped by multiple interventions, and can be difficult to attribute to any single effort.[59] This makes accountability and evaluation especially important to ensure that investments lead to meaningful progress and provide insight into which strategies are most effective.

Clear accountability frameworks help ensure that investments produce measurable improvements and maintain public trust. They provide a structure for tracking progress, learning from results, and making timely adjustments.[60] Other states combine shared outcome indicators with public reporting, third-party evaluation, and performance-based incentives to encourage continuous improvement. Potential approaches to accountability and evaluation in Utah could include:

- **Shared Outcomes Framework:** Define a core set of indicators—such as kindergarten readiness, third grade reading, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, or workforce participation—for all partnerships to track. This supports comparability while still allowing local flexibility.
- **Local Context and Priorities:** Recognize the value of selecting additional goals and measures that reflect communities' unique priorities—such as juvenile crime, chronic absenteeism, or family stability. A balance of shared and local-specific metrics helps ensure evaluation is both relevant and comparable.
- **Meaningful Reporting:** Avoid reporting outcomes as raw numbers without baselines or percentages without benchmarks, since these do not show whether progress is significant. Results should be reported relative to starting points and clearly tied to goals.
- **Interim Measures Linked to Long-Term Goals:** Acknowledge that large outcomes (like graduation rates) may shift slowly. Use logic models to connect them to nearer-term drivers (such as reducing absenteeism, expanding tutoring, or increasing parent engagement) that can show interim progress.

- **Continuous Improvement:** Require partnerships to embed cycles of collecting, analyzing, and acting on real-time data to identify needs, adjust strategies, and stay responsive to local context.
- **Independent Evaluation and Learning:** Engage independent evaluators or require evaluation expertise within partnerships to strengthen rigor, ensure consistent data collection, and support shared learning. Duke University's evaluations of North Carolina's programs documented lasting academic gains. Promise South Salt Lake partners with the Utah Education Policy Center to evaluate its initiatives and inform continuous improvement.
- **Transparency and Public Reporting:** Share results through public dashboards or community briefs to build trust and highlight progress. However, it is also important to balance the need for accountability with avoiding overly burdensome reporting requirements.
- **Data Infrastructure and Sharing:** Enable secure cross-agency data sharing to support both accountability and evaluation. Providing support for local data capacity may be needed to ensure consistent, accurate reporting.

Conclusion

Utah invests heavily in the success of its children and youth through education, health, and social programs. Community-based approaches can amplify these investments by engaging parents and families and aligning schools, service providers, and communities around shared goals. Evidence from national and state examples suggests that when partners coordinate efforts, use data to guide decisions, and address both academic and non-academic needs, more students graduate ready for postsecondary education and careers.

As Utah looks to strengthen its future workforce and reduce intergenerational poverty, community-based strategies offer one path forward. By building on existing resources and partnerships, state and local leaders can create environments where every child has access to continuous support—from early learning through career entry. Doing so would not only improve outcomes for children and families but also contribute to Utah's long-term economic growth, civic strength, and community well-being.

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Cayley Wintch, Monson Center Building Manager
David Witt, Dignity Index Program Associate

Senior Advisors

Jonathan Ball, Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst
Ari Bruening, Community-at-Large
Silvia Castro, Suazo Business Center
Gary Cornia, Marriott School of Business
Beth Jarosz, Population Reference Bureau
Darin Mellott, CBRE
Pamela S. Perlich, University of Utah
Chris Redgrave, Community-at-Large
Juliette Tennert, Community-at-Large